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LARKSPUR (*Consolida ajacis*)

Larkspur is a hardy self-seeding annual that makes an excellent fresh cut or dried flower. A native of southern Europe, larkspur has been a mainstay in American gardens since colonial times. It is a popular flower for commercial growers.

Larkspur can be a little challenging to start because of its preference for cool temperatures. Larkspur prefers to be direct seeded in cool temperatures. During wet years, it can be difficult to get onto the field to seed before the heat of summer arrives. Additionally, larkspur requires vernalization (a period of cool temperatures) to trigger flower development. It can be difficult to achieve this vernalization period with spring-sown larkspur if summer temperatures arrive early. In zones 5b or warmer, it may be possible to sow seed in the fall for blooms the following year.

SITE REQUIREMENTS

Larkspur prefers full sun and rich, slightly alkaline soil. It does not like overly wet, poorly drained soils. It prefers cool temperatures and does best in locations where summers are mild. Where summers are hot and dry, larkspur may bloom poorly.

TEMPERATURE

Larkspur plants require vernalization (a period of cool temperatures) to trigger flower development. Plants should ideally stay above freezing but *below* 55°F (13°C) for the first six weeks of growth (the ideal temperature during the vernalization period is 50°F (10°C)). Without exposure to this cold period, the plants will not flower well.

CULTURE

Seeds germinate best if they are chilled before planting. Place the seed in a ziplock bag or sealed container and chill for 7 days at 35°F (2°C).

Plants have tap roots and do not transplant easily; we recommend direct seeding. Time the seeding to achieve the necessary 6-week vernalization period: in northern latitudes, seed as soon as the ground can be worked in the spring. In warmer climates—zone 5b and south—it may be possible to seed in

CAUTION: all parts of this plant are poisonous, including the seeds. Exercise extreme caution around children, pets, and livestock. The purchaser assumes all liability relating to the use of this product.



Carrying a large bundle of larkspur and other mixed flowers at Johnny's research farm in Albion, Maine.

the fall for blooms the following spring (use caution in the Pacific Northwest where fall rain can cause seeds to rot).

Seed ¼" deep and carefully cover seeds, as they need darkness to germinate. Space seed 4–6" apart. Germination is usually high if the soil temperature is appropriate, but seeds will not germinate if soil temperature is above 55°F (13°C).

Keep the soil consistently moist during germination. Seeds should germinate in 14–21 days.

Avoid overwatering, but ensure the plants stay evenly moist, especially when flowering. In warm summer temperatures, you may want to cover the plants with 30–50% shade cloth.

Plants may require support, especially taller cultivars and plants that are grown in windy areas. For an ideal support, use 1–2 layers of hortanova trellis placed horizontally over the bed, supported by stakes and raised periodically as plants grow. Alternatively, use two strings or wires placed at 12" and 18" high on either side of the row.

Pinch blooms to prolong flowering. Flowers will bloom through early fall until the first frost.

Fall seeded larkspur will grow through the fall and remain green until the coldest weather of winter when they will lose their color and go dormant. When warm weather returns, they will emerge from dormancy and begin growing. Row covers can be added for additional frost protection and early regrowth. Note that you will need to cultivate fall-planted larkspur at least once before spring in order to deter cool-weather weeds.

Larkspur will self-sow vigorously. Because they are toxic, take care to ensure that plants don't self-sow into livestock pasture.

HARVEST

From an early spring sowing, flowers generally appear 11–13 weeks after sowing. For fresh cut flowers, harvest as soon as 2–3 flowers have

opened on the bottom 1/3 of the stem. The vase life at room temperature is 5–7 days. Ethylene gas will cause larkspur to drop its petals; therefore, do not store near fruits, vegetables, or other drying flowers.

For dried flowers, harvest when most of the flowers on the stem are open but before the petals are dropping. Dry for 2–4 weeks at 70–80°F. Larkspur retains its color well when dried.

PESTS & DISEASE

Larkspur can be susceptible to fungal disease in wet conditions. Examples include root rot and crown rot (caused by *Pythium* or *Sclerotini delphinii*), powdery mildew, and stem canker. To reduce the risk of fungal disease, plant in well-drained soil, space plants according to planting guidelines, and keep weeds down. To keep foliage dry, use drip irrigation instead of overhead irrigation. Oxidate or Actinovate products can be used to help control fungal disease.

Larkspur can also acquire black leaf spot from the *Pseudomonas delphinii* bacterium. Deter black leaf spot much in the same way as for fungal diseases: ensure good air circulation, avoid overhead irrigation, and plant in well-drained soil. Immediately remove any diseased plants.

Cyclamen mites and aphids may attack larkspur. A miticide can be helpful against mites and an insecticidal soap can be used on aphids. Pick any leaves damaged by leaf miners and destroy them. Beneficial insects may also be helpful against these pests.

REV 12/04/2017 LD, HA, PH